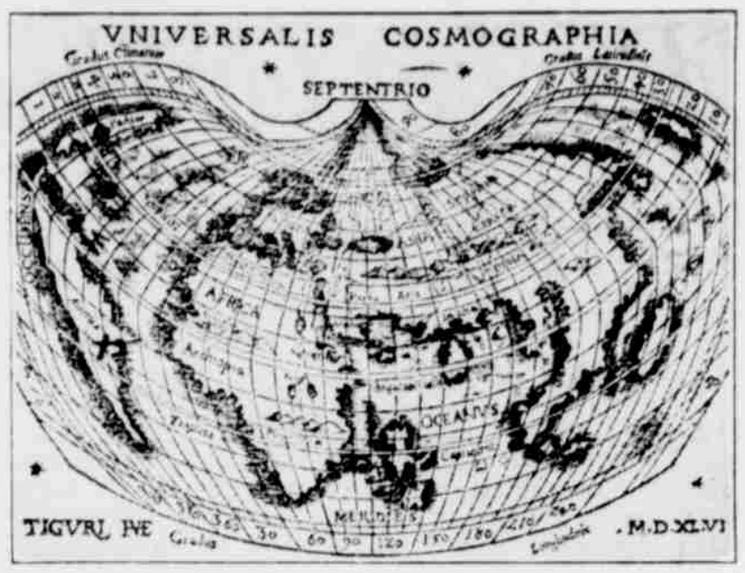
# The Town That Gave to America Its Name

By PAUL TYNER




Reproduction (in 1546) of map printed at Saint-Die in 1508 on which the name "America" first appeared.

In Saint-Dié (Vosges), France, March—(By Mail). I HAD pulled through a trying siege of the prevailing "Flu" in Paris and was sadly in need of rest and recuperation. A friend who had served through the war with the Canadian Forces recommended a week in the Vosges. He was stationed at Saint-Dié during the early stage of the struggle and his enthusiasm regarding the bracing air, of the elevation with its balm of pine forests and its picturesqueness proved contagious. A railway journey of nine hours from the capital through an interesting stretch of country, which includes several of the historic battlefields, brought me to this little town nestling in the foothills of the Vosges and saw me comfortably installed in an old-fashioned bourgeois hostelry. My windows looked across the Meurthe and to the hills encircling the town with their famous "blue" atmosphere flecked by lines and patches of snow on the upper slopes. The real "home cooking" and the genuinely assiduous and kindly concern for my comfort unobtrusively shown by my host and hostess proved most grateful to my worn and wearied mind and body, and after a few days of easy walks in and about the town, I found myself refreshed and renewed.


Commemorative tablet on the Hotel des Lud, the house in the Place Jules-Ferry, where in 1507 the name "America" was given to the New World

For the lover of the picturesque, the historical and the archeological, Saint-Dié is a veritable paradise. At every turn in the town itself, one is brought into immediate contact with monuments of the past that make live again the names, the epochs and the events that, especially for an American, hold all the charm of Old World romance and heroism. More than the ancient cathedral and its cloisters and the remains of the adjacent monastery, more than the ancient houses and fountains and statues that recall outstanding figures in the history of Europe down through nearly a thousand years, is the special interest which Saint-Dié has for Americans in the structures and tablets, memories and traditions that recall the fact that it was in this little town that the book was written and printed which first gave the name of "America" to the western continent: the place in which was made and published the first map on which the name "America" is to be found.

This significant fact was brought to my attention one day as I was returning from a little jaunt in the hills and strolling through the sunlit Place Jules-Ferry, when my attention was arrested by a white marble tablet set in the front of a modest two-story brick and cement house of ancient pattern, but evidently kept in a state of careful preservation. Translated, it reads:

"Here, on the 27th of April, 1507, under the reign of Rene II, the COSMOGRAPHIAE INTRODUCTIO, in which the New Continent received the name of AMERICA, was printed and published by the Members of the Vosgien Gymnase, Gauthier Lud, Nicolas Lud, Jean Basin, Mathias Ringmann and Martin Waldseemuller."

The tablet reminded me forcibly of a lecture many years before by my old history professor before the Wisconsin Historical Society, at Madison. Recounting a visit to Saint-Dié and his careful study of the *Cosmographiae Introductio*, he made what seemed to me a convincing argument based on the fact recorded in the tablet and its accompanying map for according to Americus Vespucius, rather than to Christopher Columbus, the honor of being America's discoverer. The thesis was further supported by a study of the records of the various voyages of both discoverers which made it plain that Columbus died in the belief that the continent on which he was the first European to set foot was in reality only the eastern coast of India, having been misled by the striking resemblance of the southern section of the American eastern coast line to that of India. Americus, in what today we call the true "scientific spirit," avoided this assumption and taking nothing for granted, determined to ascertain the facts. To this end, he sailed farther north and farther south than did Columbus; and also made more complete and thorough examinations of the coast lines of the new land. As a result, he determined definitely that the differences between the coast line of the new world and that of India, as laid down on the charts, were greater than the resemblances, and that it was *not* India, but in all probability a hitherto unknown continent in the midst of the western ocean. It was not until many years afterward that this hypothesis was completely verified by Pizarro when

*"Silent on a peak in Darien,"*

he gazed with wonder and surprise on the far-spreading Pacific. Columbus set out to realize the dream of generations of geographers as to the existence of a western passage to the Indies, and he believed he had solved that problem. Americus, without any preconception one way or the other, set out to determine the true character of the land of which Columbus had brought back to Europe the first information. That geographers of the highest attainments and repute, men well qualified to judge and contemporary with both the great navigators—in the book of which little Saint-Dié is today so proud—pronounced in favor of the claims of Americus by giving his name to the new continent, certainly seemed to clinch the great controversy which nevertheless has raged among scientific men and historians down to our own time. I remember, indeed, that a very lively discussion followed my old Wisconsin professor's lecture.

Mathias Ringmann, one of the men who gave the name "America" to the western continent.

It is to be taken into account that at the beginning of the fifteenth century literature and the sciences were already in great honor in the city of Saint-Dié, and that the *Cosmographiae Introductio* had important precursors there. Most notable of these perhaps was a book written by Pierre d'Ailly, Grand Provost of the town, and entitled *Image Mundi*, or the Image of the Universe, a geographical work of such evident authority that it became generally renowned. In this work, the author was the first to sustain the new and bold idea that other lands then unknown must be in existence, and that sailing westward from Europe one would not only reach the Indies, but also enroute find these till then undiscovered lands. This work was published in 1410 and its bold thesis was well calculated to tempt adventurous spirits to put it to the proof. Appearing also in Spain and in Portugal, it is likely that it fell into the hands of Columbus, who had already studied many geographical works and treatises on the form of the earth. Captured by Pierre d'Ailly's daring conception, it is quite likely that the reading of this book, originating at Saint-Dié, decided the Genoese navigator to undertake his first voyage of discovery. That Americus Vespucius was also among the intrepid voyagers whose blood was stirred by reading the *Image Mundi* is more than probable, and it may have been largely due to the influence of its prophetic passage on his mind that, in his four voyages, he reached and landed on the mainland of the great continent of which Columbus had only touched at the outlying islands which to this day bear the name of the West Indies.

There is, of course, a suggestion that for selfish reasons the court of Spain deliberately concealed the fact of Columbus' discovery; that Spain wanted to keep to herself all knowledge of the rich lands in the west with their wealth of gold and silver and so suppressed all publication of Columbus' reports. Accordingly, it is said, the geographers of the Vosgien Gymnase may have had no other evidence to go on than the journals of Columbus' voyages and, ignorant of his exploits, mistakenly, although in perfect good faith, gave to Americus the honor of the discovery of the New World. This assumption does not explain why the Spanish Crown should have allowed the publication of the journals of Americus Vespucius' voyages while forbidding Columbus to make public results of his voyages.

Through the courtesy of M. Louis Merlin, the mayor of Saint-Dié, I obtained an introduction to the librarian of the Bishop, M. Pierrot, who was kind enough to allow me to see a carefully preserved copy of the *Cosmographiae Introductio* and to put me in the way of getting the accompanying reproductions of the page of that work in which the name America first appeared in print, and of the printer's mark which forms the tailpiece of the volume, as well as of the map and portraits. I append a translation of the salient passages from the original Latin text:

"It was a fourth part of the world which Americus discovered and which for that reason we may well name 'America,' that is to say, the land of Americus.

"A fourth part of the world has been discovered by the navigator, Americus Vespucius. Therefore, we do not see why we should not give to these lands the name of the genius Americus, who discovered them."

"There, you have it," said my friend, the Bishop's librarian smiling proudly. "That is how our little town of Saint-Dié became the godmother of America. And if our city was the gracious godmother of the New Continent, Americus Vespucius, one may say, was its godfather—without knowing it."

And it is a point worthy of remark that Americus himself had no hand directly or indirectly in obtaining the honor so spontaneously bestowed on him by the savants and humanists united under the name of the "Gymnasium Vosagense," which at that time had arrived at the apogée of its renown under the patronage of the magnanimous Rene II., Duke of Lorraine, grandson on his mother's side of that "Good King of Provence" and known to all lovers of minstrelsy as "King of the Troubadours," whose titles also included those of Duke of Lorraine and of Bar, Duke of Anjou, Count of Provence, King of Naples and of Jerusalem. The members of the Gymnase busied themselves in literary and scientific labors and their works contributed greatly to the propagation of new ideas. In

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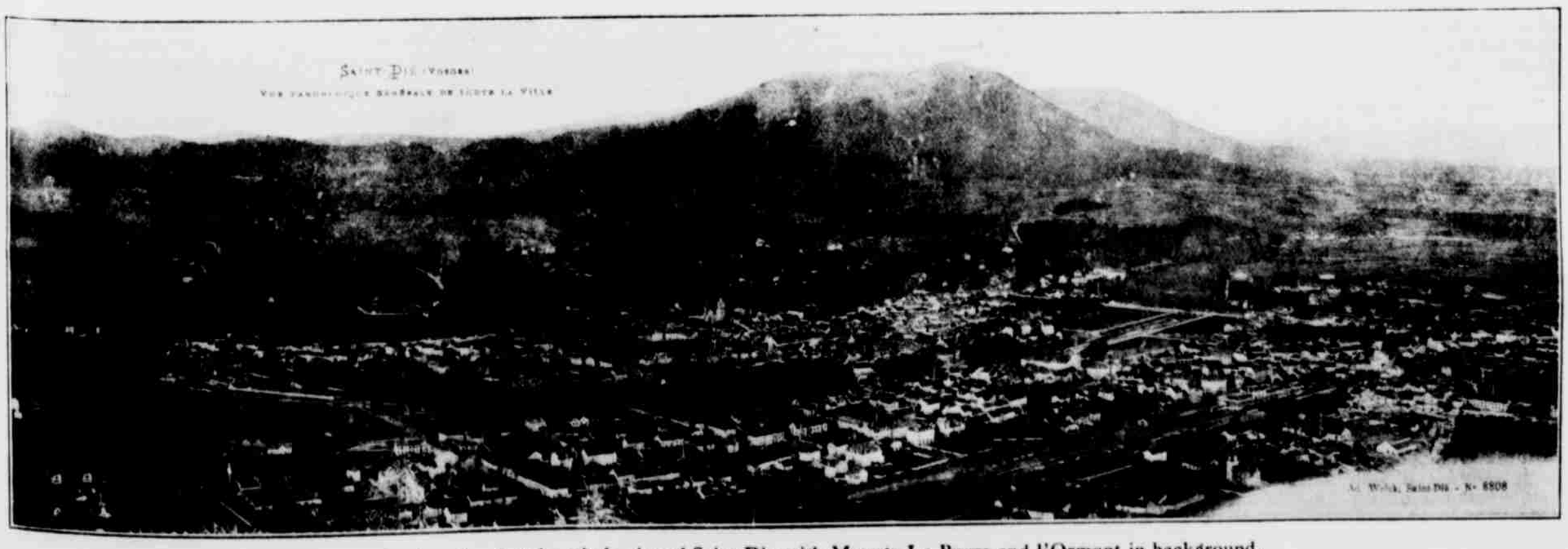


Panoramic view showing the whole city of Saint-Die with Mounts La Burre and l'Ormont in background.